



## Exploring Communication Opportunities: American Sign Language (ASL)

Families who have just found out that their child has a difference in hearing levels, which some people call *hearing loss, deaf, or hard of hearing*, often have many questions about how their child will learn to communicate. Becoming a successful communicator and learner is a journey for each child with a hearing difference and their family. Each family will have communication *choices, or opportunities*, to consider as *roads* to explore on this language journey. Each road on your journey of language and communication represents a different way you can share thoughts, ideas, experiences, and feelings with your child. Each provides unique ways to communicate with your child and nourish your child's brain with language.

One of the roads, or ways to communicate, that you can explore is American Sign Language (ASL)

### What is American Sign Language (ASL)?

- ASL is a language, like English, Spanish, or French. ASL is the language of individuals belonging to the Deaf community, which has its own unique culture, social groups, humor, and cultural values. ASL is considered by members of the Deaf community to be their natural language. Learning ASL provides families and children communication access to the Deaf community.
- ASL is a completely visual language with no written or spoken forms. When signing ASL, the brain processes linguistic information through the eyes. Facial expressions and body movements also play important roles in conveying information.
- ASL has its own unique grammar and syntax, or word and sentence forms. It is not the addition of hand signs to a spoken language. Like many languages, ASL uses a different order for presenting signed words or concepts than is used in English. Thus, it is not possible to speak English words at the same time the message is signed in ASL. Some words or concepts may be mouthed at the same time as the sign is presented to help clarify a message.
- While it is not possible to sign ASL and speak at the same time, some Deaf people are able to alternate using spoken language and using ASL depending on the communication situation. That is called *code switching*.
- Wearing hearing technology (hearing aids and/or cochlear implants) is not necessary for people who communicate with ASL. However, Deaf individuals may choose to wear amplification so that they can access language from people who use spoken language as well as those who use ASL. They might also like to benefit from the environmental sounds around them.

## Using American Sign Language (ASL)

- The main goal of using ASL is to provide the child with a complete, rich language that is fully visual and does not rely on hearing to communicate with others.
- Children may learn ASL as their first language and then learn English in its written form later as a second language. Learning the written form of English allows the child to learn to read and write, as ASL does not have a written form. Using ASL and written English together is called a *Bilingual/Bicultural* approach to communication and learning.
  - In a Bilingual/Bicultural approach, the primary way in which children communicate is through ASL as their first language. Written English is typically introduced as the child approaches school-age.
- Some families of young children with hearing differences choose to help their child learn both listening and spoken language (such as English) and American Sign Language as two separate languages. These children will be developing communication as *dual language learners*. They are also *bi-modal language learners*, as they will be learning listening and spoken language as a primarily auditory language and ASL as a visual language.
  - Studies of the language development of young dual language learners have indicated that young children are indeed able to learn two or more languages, such as English and Spanish, English and Hmong, or English and ASL. For young children to learn two different languages well, they need consistent access to both complete languages used separately in meaningful ways at home and in their community. Parents and family members using spoken language and ASL may also *code-switch* at times, in some situations, alternating spoken words and then using sign language.
- Most family members of young children with hearing differences who are exploring an American Sign Language communication opportunity will be learning a new way to communicate with their child.
  - Babies will learn any language that is used around them in meaningful ways, all the time, every day. Everyone around the child will be encouraged to sign their communication so that the child will be fully exposed to ASL. Babies who live with family members who use American Sign Language consistently and meaningfully will learn language visually through ASL.
  - To learn ASL it is important that the child have access to Deaf or hearing adults who are fluent in ASL. If parents are not Deaf and do not use ASL themselves, then they will need ongoing training to learn ASL. They will also need to learn about Deaf culture to interact with the local Deaf community as needed for the family to become proficient in using ASL.
- Children who are communicating and learning primarily with ASL may attend special school classes with other children with hearing differences who are also communicating with ASL. The classes are taught by specially trained Teachers of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing using ASL. Some children may attend their neighborhood school, with support by ASL Interpreters and Teachers of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing.

## How Does American Sign Language (ASL) Help Children Learn Literacy Skills for Reading?

While a wide range of variables impact reading skills, two of the most important factors for reading competence appear to be a strong first language and consistent and ongoing instruction in reading. Studies have shown that a deaf child's development of ASL provides them with that strong first language as the foundation for learning to read. Children then learn to read and write English as a second language through specialized instruction and curricula for children with hearing differences.

"ASL/visually based phonology facilitates the acquisition of reading in English. Young visual learners utilize visually-based phonological knowledge — such as ASL sign phonology, fingerspelling, and graphemic knowledge — which serves as an important intermediate level of processing, or a "wedge," between print and meaning."<sup>1</sup>

## How Can You Learn More About American Sign Language (ASL)?

As you start to explore American Sign Language as a communication opportunity for you and your child, there are many supportive Minnesota programs and people who can share more information and resources with you.

1. Many families find it helpful to connect with other parents and families of young children who have hearing differences to learn about different communication journeys.
  - o [Parent Guides from MN Hands & Voices](#) share information and support with fellow Minnesota families of children with hearing differences. They can also help you connect with other families individually or through fun family activities provided virtually and/or in person in communities around Minnesota.
  - o With your permission, your child's IFSP/IEP team members, including early intervention providers, Teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and/or your child's audiologist may also be able to help connect you with other families of young children with hearing differences in your community.
2. You may find it helpful to connect with Deaf or Hard of Hearing adults who communicate with ASL and learn about their lived experiences. [Deaf/Hard of Hearing Guides from MN Hands & Voices](#) and [Deaf Mentors from the Deaf Mentor Family Services](#) can help with connections, talk about their own life experiences, and share resources, too.
3. The [Minnesota Deaf Mentor Family Services](#) can provide information and supports to help families of young children with hearing differences learn American Sign Language (ASL). This includes access to online ASL classes for families, individual instruction in ASL provided by Deaf Mentors, and family activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Gallaudet Visual Language and Visual Learning (VL2); Research.  
<https://vl2.gallaudet.edu/research/research-briefs/english/advantages-early-visual-language/>

4. Your child's IFSP/IEP team members, early intervention providers, Teachers of the Deaf/ Hard of Hearing, Speech Language Pathologists, and audiologists may also be able to share information with you about ASL and help support your child's communication development. (See the Special Note below.)
  - One very helpful resource person would be an IFSP/IEP team member or service provider who knows ASL and has specialized training and expertise in facilitating ASL development in young children with hearing differences.
5. There are many online information resources about American Sign Language communication for young children with hearing differences. A list of several selected websites you might explore has been included at the end of this document beginning on page 6.

### **A Special Note:**

If you are not yet connected with Minnesota Infant and Toddler Intervention Services or Preschool Special Education Services for young children and their families, you can learn more about how to [Get Help for Your Child](#) on the [Help Me Grow MN](#) website. In addition, education leaders from the MN Department of Education and the MN Low Incidence Projects have shared an introduction [Letter for Families of Young Children with Hearing Differences](#). The letter provides more information about Help Me Grow MN and services that are offered free of charge to all eligible children and families through local public school districts across Minnesota, regardless of family income or immigration status.

### **Questions to Think About as You Consider Your Communication Journey Using American Sign Language (ASL)**

1. The primary goals of helping children learn ASL is to provide them access to communication and information using a complete visual language and to support their communication with members of the Deaf community. Do those goals seem to fit with your own current communication goals for your child and family?
2. Do you have extended family members and/or friends in your community who can help you as you help your child learn to understand and use ASL? What kinds of assistance would you like to have right now?
3. Every child and family are unique. Families, medical and audiological care providers, education professionals, family-to-family program staff, Deaf Mentors can work together in different ways to help children. What information and supports would be most helpful for you and your family as you start out on ASL communication opportunity road?
4. As families support their children's language development and communication with ASL, they learn helpful strategies from professionals, adults who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, and other parents on how to make their home a good visual language learning environment for young children. Families try to use these strategies with their child during all their daily family routines and activities.
  - a. What are your thoughts and feelings about learning ASL and new strategies that

- might change how you typically do some things in your home?
- b. How do you and other family members prefer to learn new things?
  - c. Who might be the primary caregiver(s) who will learn and use these strategies with your child first?
  - d. How might other family members or childcare providers help?
5. Children who are deaf and communicate using ASL typically attend school with other children who are also deaf and use ASL. Some children may attend a neighborhood school with assistance from an ASL interpreter and a Teacher for Deaf or Hard of Hearing.
- a. What are your educational goals for your child?
  - b. What additional information do you need right now?

### **Remember:**

#### **Babies' brains need lots of *language nutrition*.**

Your child's brain is ready and eager for you to share your love and the gift of language with them. You have started on a journey of learning and communication with your child. The journey may be familiar to you, or it may be unexpected. But, just by starting out and learning more, you are doing great things for your child and family!

#### **There is help available for you and your family.**

There are information resources that can help you learn about different ways to communicate with your child, and there are many caring people who can help you and your child on your journey.

#### **Each family is unique.**

There is no one "right" communication choice that is "the best" for all children and families. Each child is unique and needs different things. Parents and families are also different and have their own hopes and dreams for their child. They have their own family cultures, ideas, and preferences for how to communicate with their child. Some families choose one main way of communicating while other families make other choices. Your communication decisions for your child and family are respected and valued.

#### **Be flexible.**

As you learn more about hearing, hearing differences, hearing technology, your child's development, and different opportunities to support your child's language development and learning, your communication choices may change over time. Start your journey with what feels right for your child and family and be open to learning more over time. Together with fellow family members and supportive professionals, follow your child's lead and watch how they grow and develop.

## **Selected Online Information Resources about American Sign Language (ASL)**

[MN Deaf Mentor Family Services, Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota](#)

[American Society for Deaf Children](#)

- [Knowledge Center Resources](#)

[Beginnings for Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#)

- [For Parents/Families](#)
  - [Communicating with Your Child](#)
  - [Videos: Communicating with Your Child Who Has a Hearing Loss](#)
- [Resource: Language and Communication Chart](#)

[Hands & Voices: Communication Considerations A-Z](#)

- [American Sign Language \(ASL\)](#)

[Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, Gallaudet University](#)

- [For Families](#)

[National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders: What is American Sign Language?](#)

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*The Communication Opportunities resource series was written in collaboration with representatives of the MN Low Incidence Projects, the MN Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing, MN Hands & Voices, and the MN Deaf Mentor Family Program. All the articles in the series can be found on the MN Low Incidence Projects-EHDI webpage [Communication Opportunities](#). Unless otherwise specified, information in this resource is not reflective of official policies or recommendations of the MN Low Incidence Projects, the BrightWorks, the MN Department of Education, or local education agencies. The Minnesota Low Incidence Projects is made possible with a grant from the MN Department of Education. The source of the funds is federal award Special Education-Programs to States, CDEA 84.027A.*

## Resource Links for printing purposes.

A list of full website addresses used throughout this document for printed copy version of handouts:

- **Parent Guides from MN Hands & Voices:** <https://www.lssmn.org/mnhandsandvoices/>
- **Deaf/Hard of Hearing Guides from MN Hands & Voices:**  
<https://www.lssmn.org/mnhandsandvoices/about-us/deaf-and-hard-hearing-guide-program>
- **Deaf Mentors from the Deaf Mentor Family Services:**  
<https://www.lssmn.org/services/families/deaf-hard-of-hearing/mentor-services>
- **Minnesota Deaf Mentor Family Services:** <https://www.lssmn.org/services/families/deaf-hard-of-hearing/mentor-services>
- **Get Help for Your Child:** <https://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/GetHelpChild/index.html>
- **Help Me Grow MN:** <https://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/index.htm>
- **Letter for Families of Young Children with Hearing Differences:**  
[http://www.mnlowincidenceprojects.org/documents/ehdi/communicationOpp/EI\\_Family\\_letter\\_MDE\\_LIProjects\\_Aug2019.pdf](http://www.mnlowincidenceprojects.org/documents/ehdi/communicationOpp/EI_Family_letter_MDE_LIProjects_Aug2019.pdf)
- **Gallaudet Visual Language and Visual Learning (VL2); Research:**  
<https://vl2.gallaudet.edu/research/research-briefs/english/advantages-early-visual-language/>
- **Communication Opportunities:**  
<http://www.mnlowincidenceprojects.org/Projects/ehdi/ehdiCommunicationOpp.html>
- **MN Deaf Mentor Family Services, Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota:**  
<https://www.lssmn.org/services/families/deaf-hard-of-hearing/mentor-services>
- **American Society for Deaf Children:** <https://deafchildren.org/>
- **Knowledge Center Resources:** <https://deafchildren.org/knowledge-center/>
- **Beginnings for Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing:** <https://ncbegin.org/>
- **For Parents/Families:** <https://ncbegin.org/who-we-serve/parents-families/>
- **Communicating with Your Child:** <https://ncbegin.org/who-we-serve/parents-families/communicating-with-your-child/>
- **Videos: Communicating with Your Child Who Has a Hearing Loss:**  
<https://ncbegin.org/who-we-serve/parents-families/helpful-videos-for-parents.html>
- **Resource: Language and Communication Chart:** <https://ncbegin.org/who-we-serve/parents-families/communicating-with-your-child/language-and-communication-chart.html>
- **Hands & Voices: Communication Considerations A-Z:**  
<https://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/index.html>
- **American Sign Language (ASL):** <http://www.handsandvoices.org/comcon/articles/asl.htm>
- **Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, Gallaudet University:**  
<https://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/national-resources/>

- **For Families:** <https://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/ndec/families/>
- **National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders:** What is American Sign Language?: <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/american-sign-language>